


# THE WOMAN WITH A MILLION HEARTS



LOREN KLEINMAN



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A MILLION HEARTS



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LOREN KLEINMAN

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by Loren Kleinman  
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THE WOMAN WITH  
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## PART I

Can't you hear the music? I was dancing.



## Mortality

*for Christopher Hitchens*

The IV stuck out of my arm and itched my skin. My heart beat tender paces. Inside my neck, a small mass burrowed into the muscle. Under the mass, a sack of pus. Inside it, the microbes whispered, *Give up*.

My neck swelled more than two inches, the soft mass tender enough to press your finger and leave a mark. The IV itched. I wanted to rip it out, pull the vein out with the tiny tube.

Writing became a strange activity. Wanting to write became even stranger: what would be the point if I died? There's no such thing as immortality through writing. Every line I wanted to write stayed in my head. Every line I wanted to break stayed under my skin, close to the IV.

That weekend, my body remained in a New Hampshire hospital, but my thoughts remained with all the work I had to do. What didn't kill me didn't make me stronger. What didn't kill me left me in the bed to wonder if it'd get worse. If it'd kill me another time.

Staph. Sepsis. White blood cells eating away at the body. What's the use of the body? The mind is where you live. The mind is where you dream.



I started to think about Joe, and I wished I had the energy to read the poems he sent me. I wanted to invite myself out for lunch, to a poetry reading outside of myself. But then that would just have been weird.

The bed, the food, the nurses, all sweet and nice; all saying my neck seemed less swollen. The doctor. The doctor. His pen clicked and dotted the paper with the words: infection... with the words: close call. Dr. A told me *we're lucky*, and the whole time I tried to figure out who the "we" could've been.

This mortality *thing*. This thing about life...this thing about being alive. All these articles and blogs about the art of healing, about the hope; all about the hope. Hope became an article I read. Hope became a person that cheated on me.

That first night in the hospital, when everyone buzzed around me, I thought about who'd take my books. I thought about who'd miss me the most. I thought who'd take care of Doris. No one. No thing.

The neck, hot and infected and close to the brain, pulsed and brimmed with pus. I wanted to cut into it myself and rip everything out. One doctor gave me Benadryl. One doctor gave me pain meds. Another doctor, a sleeping pill. I needed sleep. I needed to fall

into the white sheet of paper I rested on. I needed to get back to work, but work became a snail that slugged along the concrete.

Months later, after the neck reduced in size, after the mass seemed to vanish, after the biopsy's needle revealed no cancer, and the antibiotics left me with numbness in most of my right hand; after the rashes and the intense dry skin peeling stopped; after the sleepless nights and the other patch of numbness on my left leg, and the infectious disease doctors, and the ENT and the GP, no one knows where the infection came from. No one knows how it started. After the three CT Scans and a month of intense follow-ups, the infection and the lump disappeared.

On my last CT Scan, I looked up at the picture of the forest embedded on the ceiling and took a deep breath as the contrast went in again, as the nurse said again, *Now you're gonna feel like you peed yourself*. I started to cry for every person with an illness, for every person facing even worse circumstances than what I faced. I felt pathetic and ashamed of my worry, but also united with those who were suffering or have suffered from illness. I felt connected and comforted by the thought that we, at

some point, touched the grey hand of mortality. I felt a strange satisfaction in having the honor of kissing death.

And life looked at me, tall and delicate, telling me, *Go back, go back. I think you still have time.*

## I am worm

I picked up my slimy, sticky, dried-up body and carried to the next reed of grass, into the next space of dirt. I kept my heart in my gut and squeezed out all the dead cells of my skin, cleansed myself in the potpourri of flowers. The bees rode me and harnessed my power.

Worm. I am worm. Earth and daughter and sun. Save me, I looked up. Save the earth in my body, the dirt in my worm. I became a strong worm, a worm nothing could eat, a steel worm, a sunflower worm. I didn't care to be anything else.

I curled up under the deck. I ate dirt, became dirt, ate decaying roots and leaves, even the manure from a fat cow. The cool air, the cool soil, dirt, cracked sticks, mushroom, potato... all love me. All. All.

No birds scared me. No ground swallowed me whole, no pinch from rubber soles. My digestion kept me whole, a root in the sunken soil, and I made a tunnel to rest in. I ate more dirt and released it. I drank fresh water and nibbled on thyme.

Water couldn't sink me. Streets couldn't kill me, tear me apart, or flatten me. I'm 600 million years old.

I drilled into the wet sand, ate a small chip of rock. I cared less than the fly and more than the bee.

Wanted honey and tea, wanted to float in the mixture,  
ease a sting.

Earth. Inside the earth. Burrowing into the dirt  
and grit and slime.

I'm the earth's intestine, small gizzard, and large  
mouth. I eat trouble whole, garbage and tissue paper.  
Love me. Love me, I say. I heart you. I don't need pills  
like you, human. I hold my own hand in despair. I'm a  
one-worm kind of worm.

I hear you from under the deck, feel the burger  
drippings on my back, and wait for the broken carrot  
heads to fall onto me. No eyes. I don't need eyes. I feel it  
all, even silence.

I don't need to stalk or kill. I am holier than that.  
I clean the guts of the dirt, the stomach of the dead cow,  
split squirrel. I can live the way I want. No We. Just I,  
long and certain of my life, confident about my body, no  
eyes needed to see in a mirror what I don't like. Nothing  
to change. I'm the earth's angel.

I don't need approval, no validation of my  
prettiness, or ugliness. Worm, caterpillar, wormwood,  
silk parachute. All worm. No doubt.

I live anywhere I want, go where the light feels  
warm. My back, my belly, all the same. Worm in the dirt,

line on paper, pen in the mud, poem in the grass, smile  
on the sidewalk. Worm slow and cool by the poolside,  
dried up like leather. No regrets, this worm. No bones,  
no jaw, no skull to hold me back.

Unhinged in the hand and in the fields and in the  
woods. Call me worm, call me *Vermis* from a great  
height. Human against the clouds, thoughtless giant,  
know-it-all. I'm the most perfect freedom, soil's  
necessity, pure and obedient to nature, my tail in the  
pond, stomach against the bramble, mouth in the dirt.  
I'll never let the grass go, the roots tangled down here  
next to the wild rose.

## I can never think of the right word

Words are the space in the stars, something unimaginable and disturbing, a planet I can't get to, or a man I loved years ago that didn't exist.

I free myself with words, with emotion. Each time I release my fingers from the constraint of emails, of the bureaucracy of forms, I'm born again, several times, into a zygote, no, wait, a weasel that rips the rabbit from the ground and swallows life whole.

You see my fingers were born in 1981 in a small hospital in New Jersey. I wish I were there to watch them come out with a sharp pencil, already looking for the words, the sharpener. My mother. My mother looked at me. I remember. She whispered in my ear that I was already whole, that I already knew the story of my life. I just had to listen to it in order to write it.

I thought of the poem. I saw it in my mother's face, in her hands, inside her belly. She gave me my name with her hands, wrote it on the yellow paper, the name I'd look up on the Internet to find it means wisdom and not poetry.

Gritty. The poem is sand between the teeth. The poem is sand in my eyes. Writing is the being lost. There's no one to turn to and ask for help.



I wanted to write for you today, dear reader, without an academic stamp on the poem. No such thing. Poetry belongs to everyone and everyone belongs to poetry.

Look. Turn your head. Look out the window. Do you see the sky? Do you see the hairline crack in the glass? That's it. That's all poetry, the natural side of things, the pain that breaks a man, and the pain that breaks the woman. It's all poetry, not big words, but emotions.

How disappointed I was to find out my name didn't mean poetry. And how happy when I realized that my name didn't have to mean poetry, that I could imagine it did, that I could reinvent myself, invent myself in the poem. I am the poem, the bright edges of a cloud, the worm holding onto the small leaf for dear life after a brilliant storm, after being told she wouldn't survive.

## No work today

The school disintegrated to ash and rubble. The people inside became stone and gold. My boss was a watermelon blossom on the side of the road and the librarian, a big old book torn apart at the seams.

I wished for so long this would happen—a vanishing. Nothing to ever go back to, nothing to feel anxiety and fear about. Not even the students spoke. They had no mouths, no eyes. They were smooth skin and needle-stitched cheeks.

When I woke up, the clock left me a love letter. Its ringing forced me to peel my skin from the sheets. I loved the mess of my morning hair and the folded sheets. My books and future stories swarmed my head. Each day I work, it gets harder and harder to write.

There is a world inside my hands that no one knows. Tree leaves sprout broccoli and beans. No one is broken, secretive, or sad. My hands are ripe as a peach, soft as a butterfly's wings, or as the sky wide open.

## I turn hate into a heart

I believe in hate. I believe in its subtle disguise, its terrifying grin. That look it gives me when I'm not looking—when I'm spelling my last name, when I think of my rapist's face, when I read the news, when I look at my nose and skin.

The wood hates the nail for drilling into its bones. The night hates the day for taking away its darkness. The flower hates the bee for stealing its nectar and passing it off as its own. The poem hates the novel.

I think of hate as the lost child, the broken record, the word that can't keep up. The ugly stepchild and the slit belly of the fish. It's important to see, to recognize, to identify with it. Hate. Let it hate you. Let it burrow in your mind and see it for what it is—fear. Talk to it. Scoop it out of your mind and serve it in the eye of a sunflower.

\*

Once, a long, long time ago, back in middle school, a girl spat on me. She told me she hated me. She said I was too fat. Fat. She hated me because I was fat, because she couldn't stand looking at my stomach, tight against the cotton shirt. I never hated her back. I never

cared to wish her death, or smear her reputation. No use. No point. No hate. No hate.

\*

Today, I get called a Jew on social media. I get told Hitler was good. I get told I'm Jew. I'm Jew—hear me roar. Roarrrrrr. Hear it. I love myself. I love my father for making me, my mother for birthing me. And I think of my heritage, my ethnicity like a long, stretched-out quilt with hearts lining the corners. I don't care what people think. I care what *I* think... about me. No one can make me hate. No one can make me hate myself.

I want hate to laugh with me. I want hate to turn into an earthworm, a small slice of bread that fills the belly, and smile across my grandmother's face. I'm happy I know hate, though. I'm happy it allows me to cry, to see the contrast in the world that brought me laughter and tears.

\*

The night is a sheet of paper. I can write anything. I can write a letter to hate. I can tell it: you are in my heart, close to my ribs—a cage of love.

## PART II

Nothing lasts forever, not the grades on paper, not even  
the lines that feed you with their skinny fingers. Your  
skin looks like chalk. Your mind is a graveyard. Your  
mouth is full of bones.



## First kiss under the floodlight

I kissed Derek beneath the floodlight in front of the house. The light in our faces didn't matter, just our tongues. I loved him so much then. I thought I loved him so much.

His tongue wrapped around mine, lips stuck together. We didn't let go, no words. Just a kiss that seemed endless.

Nothing could change us. Nothing could separate us, not even the garage door opening. Not even my father coming out and catching us in the middle of tongue twister. I liked the risk of being caught though, the thought of thinking about getting caught.

Derek didn't pull away—only to look at me, only to hold my face in his palms. He loved the point of my chin, the dimple in my left cheek and my two beauty marks on the side of my cheek. I loved his brown eyes, a mix of dirt and sky. I closed my eyes. A tall tree grew out of those eyes and its branches wrapped around me and pulled me closer.

*I love you*, I whispered between kisses. Just the sound of breath, of lungs letting go the sound of life. The kiss lingered, lasted even after the floodlight went off above us. The bugs started picking at our skin, pricking



us with their long beaks and stingers. I didn't even realize they were there, just the kiss. The kiss remained, the lips, the teeth tucked away inside the mouth.

The floodlight stayed magical in my mind. It was an iceberg in the middle of the suburban street, or a flower on a roof. I felt like a window opening, a star jumping out of the black sky, a rebel star.

Derek looked at me with those brown eyes, those muddy eyes, *I love you, Loren Kleinman. You're a star, and I want you.*

*You can have a taste,* I said and bit my bottom lip. *I can't give you everything.* I smiled. Derek smiled and dipped his face into mine again, and under the total blackness, against the summer heat and the cicada buzz, we continued to kiss as if we never spoke of anything, as if nothing and everything already happened.

Love. Love. Love. Three knots in my stomach.

## Solitude is a man

I don't know solitude like I think I know solitude. I don't recognize it when it kisses my cheek or pays my bills or lands me a good review. I doubt its intentions and scrutinize its will. I want to find the language of solitude we talk so much about, the solitude we all think we know.

My heart is a foreign city.

That word: solitude. It's a truth and a lie. I want to believe both. It's lonely when it wants to be. It's enough to make you sick and crazy. Solitude is the face made up with lipstick and eye shadow. It's the face made up of bruises. Solitude is crazy and thunderous.

Solitude is painted on the sides of houses; it's plastered on advertisements, written about in books.

\*

Solitude is an old man with fake teeth. I suspect he's unkissable. He washes with silk and dines behind roman shades.

I pass him on the street and he walks on, dizzy in the knees, a creature of disease. A creature in the field of girls passing by, saying, *How's it going, Sol.* There's a blast, a smile across his face and he feels alive.

Something takes him back to those girls smiling. Not movie stars, just girls with their miraculous smiles.

Solitude is a man alone in a railroad yard. He makes me feel better about myself. He's quiet, like me. He's simple inside. I get what he sees in life. I see that too: lots of earth, bumps on the ground, and sideways nails discarded everywhere.

He wants to be the wild animal he's meant to be, but he can't seem to go for the kill. He wants the woman. He wants to eat her, but struggles to open his mouth. He struggles to do the things that once seemed so natural, like making love, or talking.

Solitude is a man named Charles who reads Baudelaire to his girlfriend in the kitchen, his insane girlfriend who hates poems. His girlfriend picks at her thumb. She picks at his stories and poems with a chopstick.

Her face is scraped away by nails. Charles ignores her. He locks himself in the bathroom with his poetry book, and listens to his girlfriend PANG! PANG! PANG! against the door.

## The body is a poem

I'm beautiful. I want you to say it with me under the dim bathroom light: I. Am. Beautiful.

I take solace in the light on my face. I take solace in the light on my skin, on the fat that creases and bulges. I love my body, sometimes more than other times.

I've doubted my temple in the past. I've fed it horrible things like stress and butter and beer. I've hated it and squeezed my stomach in front of the mirror. I've made faces at my overweight self. Not today.

I remember where I started: I am beautiful. I put the magazine down. I stop reading the lines about how to fit in my jeans better (or for that matter, how to fit in). I tell the page it doesn't know me like I know me. I tell myself I'm not a model. I tell myself the models are not even models. They are made of wood held together by string.

I stand in front of the mirror. My skin is a white sheet of paper. My eyes are two buckets of brown dirt. I don't cry anymore over my curves. I feed it apples, pears,

and squash. I feed it squats and walks. I wash the sweat off from my workout in a warm, lavender-scented shower. The shower is a lake from a dream I had.

I don't body-shame myself. I don't let others body shame me either. I'm responsible for how I see myself in this world, in this long and wide world of hurtful words and scams of the heart.

Go now. This is not a body of hate. This body does not hate itself. There's nothing here to consume, but love. Self-sabotage is a hand that does not hurt me anymore. My body sings me to sleep. My body is ground, gravel, twigs, and brambles.

My feet dangle from the bed. I examine the cracked skin, the dried patches on the tops of my toes. I see my legs, freckled and chubby, against the cat's back. I rub my arms, the stretched skin, too. I pull my messy hair back in a bun and sigh deep and slow. The room is quiet. The bathroom mirror is quiet. There is no sound—only my heart, gentle and warm, and it says, *Thank you for loving me again.* And my fingers rest on my chest. They can hear the sound of my heart.

I push myself off the bed and look in the long, wooden framed mirror. All those spots. All those scars and scabs. All those dimples in the thigh. It's all a poem to me.

## L train daydream

*I live in two unique worlds, traveling between both with just the opening or closing of my eyes. — Richelle E. Goodrich*

I walk to the tall stairs in subway and look up. The edges are sharp. People walk, stomp, and click up as fast as they can, push me aside, bump into my shoulders. The people are stairs, flat and unforgiving, full of fallen hair, receipts, and discarded MTA cards.

I have to go up, I have to take the first step to move on. There's a crowd that won't look at me, acknowledge my body, my face, my messy hair tied back, brown and long. My pants stick to the inside of my thighs—sweat and heat stitch their cotton skin to mine. No one sees this. No one will know the salty waves pooling under my armpits. I want to swim away.

I close my eyes. The subway becomes an ocean, its people—the fish. Sharks swipe their beaks at my chin, the starfish hold onto the rocks, and the eels tickle my feet—the algae like a soft hand on my heels. The water, cold and sandy, rubs me down, peels away the excess skin, and reveals scales on my legs, gills behind my ears. I breathe in the water and exhale all the things



that don't matter anymore: bills, office work, emails, texts, phones, the Internet.

The subway is full of calm water. It's dark and there are no more stairs, just a shoreline and scallop-like ridges pressed into the sand. I swim closer to this cusp and rub my face on it and leave it behind to kiss the marsh. Above me swims a school of blue eye, belt, bumpers, and butterfish. A cobia flaps its tail in my face, forces me out of the marsh from behind the leafless sea trees to a bright spot by the rocks.

My body glitters under the surface. There's no noise, just the stillness of bubbles and faint echo of waves. There's a hum that comes even farther from out of the depths, a blackness of which I'm not afraid. Even the big fish—I'm not afraid of their hunger, of their growling bellies that wish to pull me apart. Instead, I face each that nips at my tail. Let them swallow me alive, split me in half. I will wade here. I won't move.

I hear the screech come off the tracks and wake me from my daydream. The conductors poke their heads out like snails from their shells. It's high tide and people rush out from behind the doors, thump into me and spit water. Some of them can't climb up the stairs—their tails too slippery and they can't make it past the

sharks, or the backrush. They surrender to the jetty and die.

It's summer outside, hot over the water. I swim up. My tail separates into kicking legs, my gills smooth out. My hair grows back into the same messy bun, and my face regains its human contours. I rush to the surface. I make it through the emperors and flat heads, stretch my head and fill my lungs with air. The water separates and I walk through, untouched by the surrounding fish, uncaring about the length of their tails, the sharpness of their teeth, or their venomous sting.

I walk through Brooklyn and feel the spray of water from flapping tails, the wisp of sand on my face, a gust of wind from the ocean's exhalation. There's a never-ending twilight. I'm the only girl in the world who walks through a flood tide and doesn't drown. Tall buildings and overgrown glass cubicles don't grow here. The ocean is created by a woman named Truth. Life deepens because of her.

The path back home is strewn with phytoplankton and algae that light up the night. They make the darkness shine. Everything depends on them.

## PART III

The room is quiet now. All the valleys, their  
unclean caves.



## I put down my cell phone

I burn it—log off. Pull the wire from the wall. Rip it out. Log on to myself. Log into the long nights on a lawn in front of my house. The summer air buzzes with cicada thighs. I drink the moonlight and rub the dew with my feet. I'm gone. Nowhere near the gadgets that control my life, texts and TV. I'm free.

I open my mouth. Laugh, loudly. Laugh at nothing at all. Laugh just because I can laugh. The trees sway and tickle my chin, giggle with me. Cupping my hand around the flower's soft faces, I stare into their bright stems. It's funny they started out as seeds to end up in my hands, still in the ground.

Tonight, I take a hot shower, lather my skin under the heat after a long day. I stitch my favorite books together—I go to sleep in them. I stretch out on the bed, naked. The heat rolls off me. The water is cooled by the air and chills my knees. I stand up. Look out the window. Fly with the birds. I don't care about anything else but the birds.

I curl up on the carpet, cuddle with the dust bunnies, and dream of nothing. I sleep. Close my eyes. No more breath. No more bites on the inside of my cheek. Today, I'm free. No one is around me, just the

walls of the room, just the carpet and my legs rubbing against one another. My towel is my blanket, a patch of grass at my feet.

Today, I love myself in more than four words and hashtags and bestsellers. I take a breath and hold the door open for someone I don't know, treat myself to the toasted croissant smothered with raspberry jam and lick the jam off my fingers.

I don't believe in resistance. I write that damn book. I go on, keep going, pick up my pen, open my laptop, and write. Even if no one is listening, even if no one cares. Page after page, my words fly and jump. They are people living their own lives: eating, drinking, dancing and shaking their hair.

I dream again. A cool wind goes through my shirt. The trees bend their branches in the night. I sleep under the tree outside my window and become its branches. Become the leaves that fall to the ground and get buried in dirt and high grass. My eyes are shelled by sticks and small pebbles at the base of the heavy roots. My smile wraps around the thick trunk and my legs grow deep into the soil. The night tickles my bark and soft, plump cheeks.

When I open my eyes, I'm still in the root cradle.

## Nostalgia

The stars glitter over the houses below the 17<sup>th</sup> floor. I wonder about the last summer and the summer before that. The night I took my shirt off under the cherry blossom in the school yard and grabbed the joint from the hand of a tall, blond boy. I think about the longing in my gut for more wine and the sky. How it pulled back my hair, my heartbeat like a silver bullet to the chest.

At 23, the road seemed an endless sentence behind the hood of a pick-up truck. I smoked my last cigarette and the music blared its drum and bass. I wanted so much to be a famous writer. What did I know about being a writer? I wanted to pour myself on the leather interior, spread my legs, and let my fingers slide in, tilt my head back and forget about ever growing older.

The last night I spent home before I moved to England, I remember my father crying. My mother folded the red sheets in the suitcase and packed the small breakfast bars in a plastic bag. I smiled at her. My father went to bed early and I stayed up and hugged my pillow. I placed the one-way tickets on the table next to me. I had no idea where I'd go off, where that plane

would take me—the plan I folded in the back of my head. I knew I'd get there and walk through the airport, run off to the queue to an elevator and out the door to Uni.

I closed my eyes and drifted off to the side of the alarm clock.

The next day, the coffee danced through the kitchen. The eggs spat on the pan, sizzled in the storm of things I'd miss. I wandered my eyes over the long wooden table, ran my fingers on the suitcase handle and the keys I'd leave behind. The shower seemed too far away, the stairs a stretch of land in a black desert. What did I know about desire or love? What did I expect I'd find across the ocean? A book waiting to be written? A professor trying to teach me things I can only learn from myself? Lines. Long lines and America, how I loved her, how I already I missed her northeast highways and paved black tar strips under the four wheels.

America. America. I never wanted to go, never wanted to leave the comfort of your aged hands, your palm on my forehead. How I cried that day. Tears. Long tears no one could teach me to write. I missed everything about her, and my father and my sister and my mother. I took a deep breath, a step out the door



towards the town car. Inside it, someone I'd never met before nor would meet again.

I kissed my family, shoved my hand in my duffle bag, and walked into the soft curl of the day. Sadness. The stomach turned and cracked. I'd be so far. Books shuffled under my arm: Bukowski, Hartwig, and Smith. I hated to part with all the things that loved me so: Mom, the tree outside my window, the plaid wallpaper that peeled at the edge of my pillow. The dogs watched me, tails back and forth against my sister's thigh.

I opened the car door. This man drove me away, onto 78 toward Newark. I got to the departures gate alone, all by myself, and with no tears. What did I expect would happen? What did I want? The air smelled of French fries, cheeseburgers, and booze, and buzzed with the sound of rolling luggage. I found the nearest bar and drank three glasses of wine and wrote, *I love you* on the back of a torn off piece of book and stuffed it under a napkin holder on the bar.

I shuffled my bags and checked them in. The security line seemed to go so fast. None of the people loved me, or knew where I'd be in six hours. When I entered the plane, everyone grinned and pushed their

carry-ons under their seats. I held the strap of my bag, lifted it up overhead and sank into the chair.

The plane's engines burned. The pilot announced take off. Just like that. We ascended into the air, left the rainy ground below. I closed my eyes and squeezed the armrest, prayed to God we wouldn't crash, told God how sorry I felt for never praying.

All quiet. The seat belt light turned off and, three hours in, I hovered over the Atlantic. I couldn't fall asleep, just breathed in and out, and wondered if England would be like the pictures in my guidebook. I twirled my hair for the last three hours and kept Charles Bukowski close to my thigh.

When I landed, I thought about the note I left for the Garden State, a piece of me still back in New Jersey, back in that pick up truck, in the school yard. I could feel the cool air against my breasts and England didn't feel so scary.

I could never leave home behind. It'd be everywhere I'd go.

And tonight, especially tonight.

I love tonight.

## PART IV

When I open my eyes, I'm still in the root cradle.



## Alone in my office, I drink coffee, lost in a dream

My office is dull, and I pick at the skin around my thumb.

I want to be desired for my work, not discarded on the computer keyboard, smeared against the desk, and brushed under the stack of paper. Don't hide me behind the board, or under a conference desk. Don't lie to me about a raise.

I'm a writer and a teacher. I'm an employee and a broken heart. I eat plums and almonds over the sink as I grade papers and advise students on how to be more real. *You have to write it like this*, I say, and cross out all the adverbs, all the gerunds, and yous. *I want first person*, I write to one student and bite into the plum. Its juice blurs the verbs.

\*

Last night, I fell asleep on the couch under my cilantro plants and, when I woke up, the first thing I did was pick at the stem that hung over the pot. I held the cilantro in my mouth and closed my eyes, and took deep breaths. My chest was full of cilantro and peace. Under my nails, dirt and potting soil nestled into the skin. I wanted to be the cilantro, to have someone hold me on his tongue.

I want to live like the cilantro, grounded and breakable. Live like the snail and the earthworm, slow and steady. Live like the rock star and the nanny, drugged and wholesome. I want all these lives to drown me, tear me up and spit me up. I'll always be whole and teach what I've learned. I'm a new country every day, a new solar system not yet discovered.

I finish the coffee—hope I don't cross out their words. Perfect disasters—only part of them written down.

## The world is nothing like how I imagined

I kept my windows closed and my whiskey by the bed. I felt wicked, my naked body full of wind. I touched myself, the small slit between my thighs, how I moaned alone. How I cried under the blankets and thought about how I used to be like someone else, *so so so* far away.

At first the sun burned my skin. The clouds pointed at me like guns. I walked weary and worn down. My face chipped like glass. My heart, a stealth ray of light to the core. My feet hurt from walking; my eyes burned from the tears.

I watched the birds, how their wings lifted them up and around the large masts of time. The trees made a long howl and the sound of veins rattled beneath my skin. I loved the pain. I loved the pressure against my rib cage. The grass always felt so cool and wet.

My mother ran across my mind. Her brown hair, her eyes, a slice of dirt pie and tree trunk. I missed her. I couldn't reach her to tell her how I tried to be a good girl, how I prayed under the cherry blossom tree for the rain to drown me. Instead, the world grew around me and brought me underground, deep, deep.

The world looked different from below. The sky sheltered me. I liked it that way.



## We're right here

Joe and I dance in the living room. We hold our beers in one hand and spin around the carpet. The TV is low and blues music rattles the walls. I look at his unshaven face and reach out, sliding the back of my hand across his cheek. I love him and the way he dances and then stops to smile at me. I love how he plays the air drum and then drums around me.

I unbutton my blouse with one hand. Let down my brown hair. I shake my head and loose strands go wild. I feel wild. Like a lion or a tiger or a river. I dance towards him and sway my hips. Joe smiles at me and takes my hand in his. He pulls me to his chest. I can smell the olives he ate just a little bit ago.

He still has olive oil on his fingertips and he wipes them across my chest and kisses the shiny streak against my skin. He spins me away from him and goes to the kitchen for another beer. I dance alone. My hair swings behind me and the candles are starting to turn us into outlines on the wall. The amber glow twinkles all over Jack Kerouac the cat's fur. I bend down to pet the patch of light on him.

Joe returns with the open beer and takes my hand. He swings me into his chest and kisses my neck. I

hear banjos now, bluegrass rhythm and a woman's raspy voice. The combination of kisses with music makes me bend my neck so he can have more of me.

He calls my name. He yells it over the record spinning on the vintage hutch next to the liquor cabinet. It's black outside, with the exception of a few lights and the honking of horns. He shares his hand again and holds my face in his palms. We both smile and smell like beer. The cats rub against our legs and the candles burn. I do my best to stop time.

## Cooking naked

It's just me now. And you. The light overhead is off and the cats are asleep. The carpet breaks down and strands of pulled cotton pool up at the side of the couch. There's an empty bottle of wine and the smell of incense burns through the room.

I hold your face in my hand and press my naked body against yours. No clothes needed now. No light or sun or wind. Cracker crumbs and bits of cheese fall on the glass table. I run my open hand against the cool wood.

I love the way the floor feels against my back, your calloused hand on my skin, how it strokes up and down my spine. I love the way the chicken smells in the oven, roasting, the tarragon and lemon pepper floating through the apartment.

I sit up and shake the last drips of the wine from the bottle into my mouth. *There's nothing left*, you say and laugh. I shake it. I shake it again over you and you giggle and say, *Stop*. Push it away and then take it from my hand. I roll on top of you and kiss your forehead, stand up and walk to the oven, my breasts hanging across my chest.

I take the oven mitts and slip them on my hands, open the door, and reach in to pull out the chicken. My nipples are warm from the heat and I breathe in the rosemary and thyme. *Watch out. You'll burn your tits*, Joe says. *Wouldn't be the first time*, I call back.

I walk to the other bottles of wine and pull out a chardonnay. *White goes with breast meat*, I call out and walk to the couch, hold up two bottles over my breasts. We laugh and I find the corkscrew.

Joe gets up from the floor and takes the bottles from me. He places them on the counter and proceeds to open them. There's a pop and we cheer. He pours me a glass as I cut into the tender chicken. The skin crackles. Honey sticks to my fingers and Joe licks them clean.

## PART V

Outside my window the bluebird's beak pokes the sky.  
Her voice reminds me of butter and strawberry jam.



## Hands and loose flour

My grandfather's hands were born in 1917 right as the Great War was winding down. His small hand curled around my Mema's index finger, and, as the doctor's took him away he screeched, reaching out his hands.

At 13 years old, he picked up loose change on the way to school and lit cigarettes. One day, his hands hit the principal of his school after he called my grandfather a guinea. His hands were cuffed and sent to juvenile hall. He carved words on the concrete wall and picked out food from his teeth.

Later, he held guns in Germany and lit fires on the beach in Normandy. He sang songs and clanked beer bottles in a barrack. He fixed engines and caught a small dog running loose on base camp. He pet the dog, gentle—those big hands held the dog in the pictures he showed me.

When my grandfather returned from the war, he slid a ring on my grandmother's hand. He bent down on one knee and took her hand in his. Her small, chubby hand looked like a star in the dark world.

Pictures revealed my grandfather waving to his family from his couch; his hands held Christmas

wrapping and my mother on one knee. His hands, not still. Never still. Like liquid that never stops changing or moving.

For my first birthday, my grandfather carried out the strawberry shortcake into the backyard of my parents' first house. I must've noticed his hands then—how he made me the first cake I'd ever eaten, the only cake I'd ever eat again for my birthday. He sliced through the icing and strawberries, brought me my own plate and wiped off the icing with a towel.

I'd examine my grandfather's hands as he dug in the garden and pulled the weeds away from the healthy tomato plants. The dirt covered his palms, cushioned in the nails. I imitated him and pressed my own hands into the soil, blackened my own palms, filled my own nail beds with dirt.

When I was 10, he'd pick me up from elementary school in his large, boat-like Cadillac and drive us off to the local pizzeria. He'd cut up my pizza with a Swiss Army knife. His hands squirmed to open the blade and after he sliced up bite-sized pieces for me, he'd push the blade back into its bed—his hands whitened by the pressure.



I loved my grandfather's hands. Even as he passed, I held his hand in mine until the very end. I watched his hands—the ones that lifted me to steal chocolate, dug up flowers and picked tomatoes for me, and the ones that sliced me my very first piece of cake.

At his funeral, I slipped that Swiss Army knife he used to cut my pizza into his hand. I stared at him in the casket and imagined his hands covered in flour on my first birthday.

## Dana

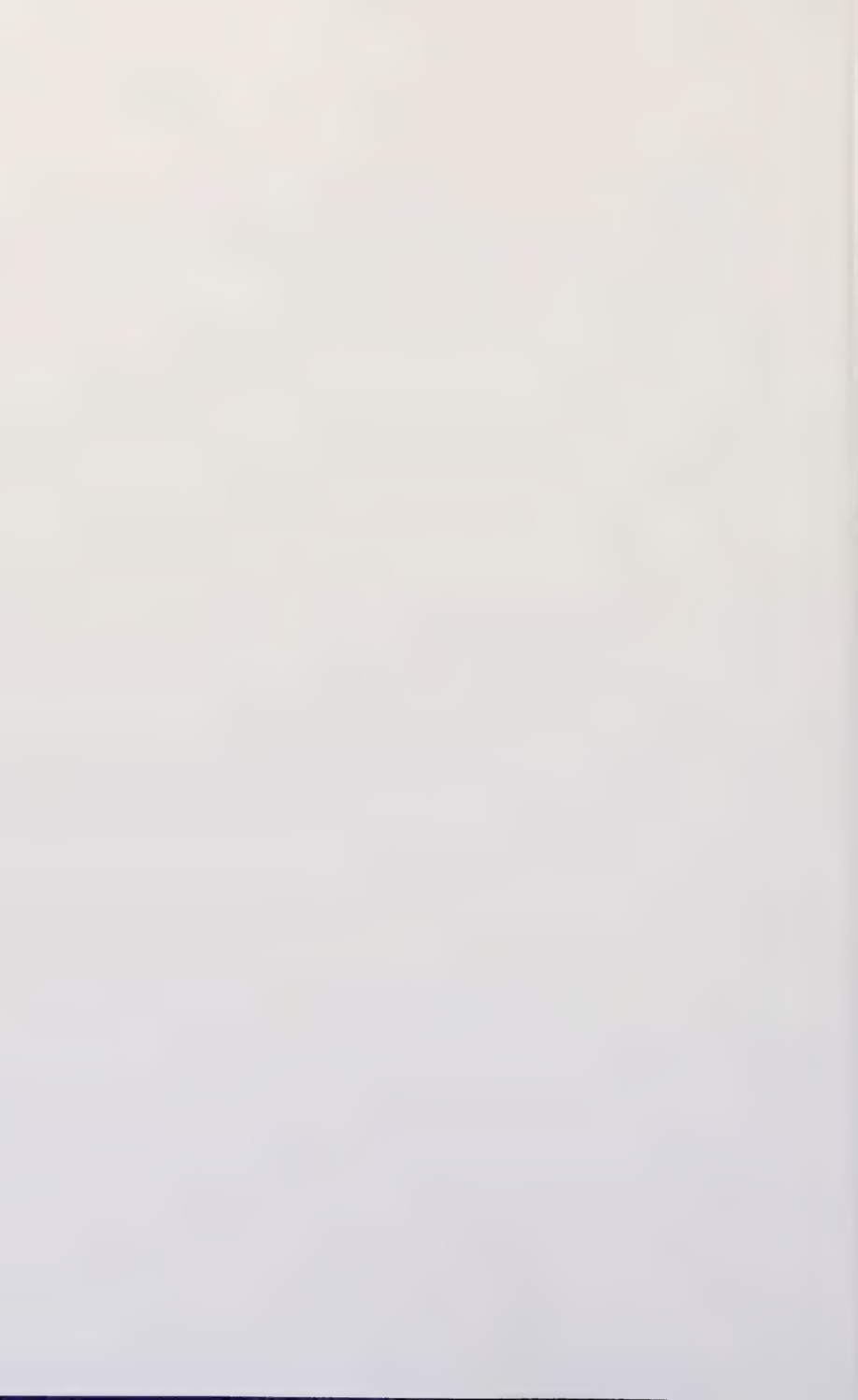
Next to the cucumbers she says, *Yo mamma is so ugly she made One Direction turn the other direction.* I laugh, almost spitting out my wine.

She runs to the pool and jumps in. Water splashes on my legs.

Later she asks me, *Loren, do you think I'm pretty?* I smile. Dana laughs and says, *Wanna to hear another yo mamma joke?*

## PART VI

It's black outside. I dream again.



## Spider

I go to the pool behind my house, dip my feet in, splash a spider to the side and onto the grass. I watch it crawl, get its bearings, take its first breath. We look at each other, stare into our other-worldliness.

The trees flap in the wind—branch crackle and leaf ruffle fill the backyard, and my hand touches the water's surface.

The spider is gone now. It doesn't care to look back.

I stretch my neck, bend it to one side and lean back, press my hands into the cool grass. The sounds of cicadas drench the night with their summer thighs. I dream of poetry. I dream about becoming a poem: commas, em dashes and all the cursive and typeset writing me into the white sheet of paper, writing me so that I'm not a stranger to myself any longer.

It's just the grass and me, my hands on my wet thighs and my heart slow and steady under the moonlight. I love the bushes and the gravel. I love the howl of the soil for more roots. I listen to nature, to the things that matter: life.

My heart doesn't end here, not at this line. It stretches to the top of the water and I fall in. I take a big

breath, a large heaping breath to fill my chest, puff it out and sink to the bottom. I look up at the white light shining from the moon, from the stars. I stay under water and, when I can't hold my breath any longer, I shoot up and slick back my hair with my hands.

Floating on my back across the length of the pool, my heart aches because I wish I could stay in the water forever and not get wrinkled by time.

On the beach now. Hear the water splash against the stones. Hear the seagulls and that long, soft static coming off the horizon. Think about the spider. Become the spider. No longer drowning.

## **I let go of everyone's hand**

I'm the woman I'm supposed to be. Far away. Beautiful, with no guilt. No shame. Just a beautiful spot. My own space—new and terrifying.

## I looked into the sky

The largest cloud swallows me whole. I rumble, stretch out and don't consider looking back. I never do. I'm fine right here. I'm spit out, drifting off into the sunlight and dissolve toward the evening. Detach. Detach. Detach. I'm rising into the cauliflower atmosphere.

I'm grey, a layer of drizzle, ice prism, and snow. I'm visible through the thick grey outline. I'd rather be shaped like a honeycomb, the length of an arm, a patch of blue sky, a stratus.

The colored rings, the edges of the rounded masses roll me across to the virga. She reveals me to the sun, an offering that produces a halo around my soft scalp. No more visibility. No more days. Again, the world is gone. There are no doors, no mirrors or words, only strings of precipitation, shadows, and objects without names.

No one can ever see me, just an outline barely discernable, dissipating over the dark horizon. I appear as the morning grows and disappear as the music from a picnic lowers into twilight. I don't know where I'll end up, and where I won't. I breathe. The storm is coming,



the shape of a large plume or anvil. How it wants to pound me down to earth. I won't go. I won't. I promise.

The large cotton mountain comes towards me and plunges into my side. The pain. Crying now. Oh, how I cry. How the wind forces me out of its innards. But I won't go. I will not leave the loosed-down hair of the low, ragged clouds. They brought me here for a reason. They wanted me to see their painful beauty—damp smiles. How I love them, appreciate their folds and rolls, the way they shroud the sun in a milky veil and cover the plants with their white hair.

Now that I'm up here, I can't come down. If they force me out, I'll lay on the cool grass every night and offer myself to all the elements. I'll pray to be transported a hundred miles up. I want to spread everywhere, even at the edge of the black lace crystal clouds. I'll stay on this ground, right here, through day and night, through storm and sun. I'll die if I'm cast out into the foggy wilderness.

Never let me go, raincloud, never let me fall. Leave room for me, enough space to hide in the smallest storm.

## Bag of Light

I filled my paper bag with all the light in the wilderness. The sky watched from above and melted into the ground. The bag became heavy. I took enough light to paint the entire street beneath my feet, all of the streets over all of the countries.

No light anymore for the people around me. No light left to glitter over fresh footprints in the mud. Nothing to warm the skin or paint the flowers. No piece of earth can grow, no parts of it, no tomato plant, basil or sweet pepper.

The little girl can't ride her bike through the yellow glow, the woman can't tan or burn her white chest. Water is dark, tadpoles whisper to each other, call out two algae walls away from each other.

At 5 a.m. there's no light. At 5 p.m. there're only woods, and trees. Flies from the bell jar echo into the orchestra against the wind, against the sky, against the wall. Calm. Doubtful, crying, longing. Don't wish for the light back. I won't let it out of my bag, even before dawn, even before evening, even before the afternoon.

And from East to West a goldfish gets lost in its own bowl. It can't see through the glass—only music, a full moon, an afternoon of clock strokes. No peace of

mind, just circles in different orders throughout the week.

I hold the light. Do not speak. Do not see. Do not eat. I wait for all the noise to dissipate. The light stays in the bag like a school lunch ready to be eaten, to be let out, poured onto a sandwich or wild flower patch.

I will not let it out yet. I'll find a stone to sit on, to kick my heels against the grass, and throw the bag in the river, let it drift into the sky, let it become a vine—wrap up and around a tall tree, vanish into the wind. I'll lie back onto the grass and watch the light through my thighs. It smiles against the blue.

## Statistics

- Born:** Year of the Rooster.
- Favorite food:** Salted bread.
- Early childhood:** Became rocks. Dragged my knees through dirt. Wrapped the night around my shoulders.
- Adolescence:** I collected daisies. Graduated from one school to go to the next. Met a man. He loved me so. Left man and met another. Wrote a book. Ate the pages.
- Late Adolescence:** Ate the rooster. Swam to the center of the moon. Floated in the sky, fell down to the ground, skinned my face. Loved my lips, dressed them in the dark.
- At Present:** Loving myself. Eating clouds. Typing up a storm. Covering my head from the rain.

## **Recipient of no award.**

### **Statement:**

People wanted to cut out all the things they didn't like about me. I taped my body, hid from their fingers, from their long arms. I lifted my head up and licked the sun, sucked out all the clouds from the sky, and held them in my belly. I am whole now. I don't know what it feels like to be in pieces anymore.

**P.S.** If you are missing pieces of your body, leave a note for them and wait for them to find their way back to you.

The words are butterflies, the pages their wings. Inside me, a field of green grass, a powerful potion made out of ink, of unborn words and broken mirrors. The ink turns the hands into messengers, a flute held with love.

Dear Buk,

The blazing yellow sunlight shines across my breasts.

I miss you.

I'm alone this morning. The bed is unmade and everyone is at work—the birds outside are chirping like mad. And then PANG! PANG! PANG! The cat knocks over the fucking water glass. There's water everywhere. It's on the small square rug you took a piss on once. I grabbed a towel to clean it up. So much water. So much I had to take my top off. I'm still soaked.

I thought all morning about the water glass, the shards still on the floor. The cat still under the bed. I yelled. The poor cat, and that water continued to drip, drip, drip all down the night table. It ruined the book you sent me, and destroyed the rolling papers for the pot I saved for later. There should've been a lawn on the floor and sun to dry out the excess.

I was so mad. I swear I wanted to kill that cat. But I couldn't, I just couldn't kill the cat. It looked at me with those big amber eyes, and that face, that goddamn face, like a garden in the afternoon. And all that pretty hair, and those whiskers, how they looked all wet.

I think we had some conversation, or some connection, because the cat knew I was mad and ran under the bed. I stayed above, on the mattress, no top—fingered myself and thought of you—majestic, magic, infinite, sun on the carpet.

Meanwhile, you're with some whore at a bar, and I don't care in the least. I'm able to separate love and lust, glory and a cracked skull, and that whore and you. I feel gentleness towards her, how she mouths your initials right before she's about to go down on you just as I'm about to read your books...or something like that.

Now I'm all right. But where the hell is this cat? I can't find him. I feel like I have to pedal over all this water, dip my toes in it, swim under the bed and grab him out of there, from that pile of books you left me about sexual positions we'd try.

Now my eyes are wide, a pretty brown smothered with your shaving cream and a few good poems.

I wish you were here. I wish you'd lay down with me, right next to me and smile. I wish you'd do it before I get too vulnerable, too dissatisfied, too disillusioned.

Either way you make me sick and full of promise at the same time.

I hate that you're there. I hate that I'm here chasing old books.

Love,

L

P.S. I read those Steinbeck, Hemingway and Fyodor Dos books and so forth. I expected them to be better for some reason. Maybe I need to read them drunk, or naked, or while we fuck—me on top, in the middle of the public library.



## On reading *Hold the Dark*

I read your book in the root cellar, hovered over the body of the Slone boy and held the dark against my chest. The cold shaped each breath, a silhouette of someone I thought I remembered. He began to remind me of a sentence I wanted to write, something that seemed impossible like love.

The room filled itself with the shadow of that Alaska color. Beneath the chairs at the base of the stairs, a clip of hair and wolves' teeth.

I'm there: the eyes of the wolf, the gun at my temple. Each page—I eat each page. The words get stuck in my teeth. As hard as I try to pick them out with the claw of a lost fox, the hairs get in the way. Your mother screams and breaks my silence.

I can't hold the dark much longer. I can't feel the pain of cold, the long cold with that feeling that no one can feel. Emptiness—tin cans rattling on a string. Chills. All chills down my shoulders and inner thighs.

I keep reading—my face, the right side next to the window, the cold beating down on the pane. The only silence is the wood piled at the corner of the cellar. No sign of summer. No sign of letting go or moving on.

The body of the child is still, frost bite on the toes. No one could break these bones. Too cold to thaw. I want to read more, to walk without a snarl in the pit of my chest bones. And the sky, the sky is hard to see from here. But I don't want to see it: none of the light, all glare at the end.

## Bela Lugosi is dead

Joe and I get drunk in our apartment on rum shots and eggplant parmigiano. I like the way the sauce smears on his cheek. I lick it off. The rum bottle is chipped at the mouth. I smoke the joint, take my top off, my bra white and lacey. Joy Division plays on and on and on.

I smoke. Drink. Smoke. Drink again. Stumble to the window. Light a cigarette, blow the smoke through the apartment, over the basil, over the tray of burnt mozzarella and bread crumbs. I dip my finger, press and swirl it around the tomato chunks. Mouth open I suck on my index finger, give it something to remember.

My body is a hill, a mountain, a valley, a soft cloud in white cotton. My thighs are thick and wrapped in skin. I dance in place, shake my head, my hair swinging, covering my face, and covering my eyes. I can't see Joe anymore. I just dance on the hard wood floor. I shake and rattle and roll.

He watches me from the window. Lights another cigarette, smiles, the brim of his hat showing a small line of eyes. I don't want to go over there. I don't want to turn this moment into a few minutes of fucking. I want to keep dancing to the guitar squeal.

Bela Lugosi is dead. Bela Lugosi is dead, I sing. I love this song, the anticipation of it all. The shaking strings, my breasts feel alive. My pussy feels alive. I want more. I want it all: the windows to explode, the air sucked out of the room by some giant alien attack. I want the room to keep spinning and lights to burst their bulbs.

Pour me some more booze. Pour me another shot. Suck it from my navel. Suck it from my mouth. Bite my neck. Bite the inside of my arm, and pull my hair. Let me lose control in front of the window and get spanked for peeking in with the binoculars.

## PART VII

Life is very much the same, hotel rooms, cheeseburger  
and fries, and our bodies.



## New Job

There are graves beneath New York City. The lives of vampires squashed by banks and telephone meetings. So many hours spent on conference calls, so many hours spent warming up bagels and pouring coffee, finding another bus route.

Wake up every morning at 6 a.m.—shower in butter, fold your hands in bread. Lick the fingers of those you already ate. When you walk down sidewalks, the bones of dogs and cats line the wide streets. They make an arrow, an arrow of bones.

Get in the cab—coffins with windows clear and made swampy by previous passengers' drool. Prop your head on the glass, press your elbows into your thighs, relax your neck, loosen the tie, the hipster pants, tie back your hair.

Trapped. Trapped behind an office door, on top of a torn cloth seat. Your cell phone drops to the floor—too far to reach.

Head to the subway. Greet the doors. There's no room to fit. Another body. Squeeze. Squeeze. No need to hold the breath, no need to breathe. Every car is full. Squeals echo down the track.

Bodies all look the same: eyes, nose, messy hair, a fat ass, skinny legs, white, black, whatever. There's difference. You don't matter. No one matters as much as they think they do, not under the stars, under the heavy Milky Way, the secret language of the seas and the burn of the sun. No one matters at all.

You realize this: head bow, fingers crack, your chest begins to hurt. Everyone next to you, beyond you looks like a flower, a fallen petal, a splinter of wood, a coffee bean, a lost word.

Even when you close your eyes you can't remember where you started.

The train backs up down the track. Someone cleans the seats and prepares for the next cycle—makes a pile of lost shoes, empty coffee cups, cell phone chargers, wallets, ear buds, shoelaces. The pile gets larger through the day, higher and higher at the back window. The lost things get thrown under the tarp at the other end of the track.



## Freelance

The days pile on, mornings light over the coffee pot.

A new chair every day. A new cup of water, tea, croissant. Biting. Flakes and butter swirl in my mouth. The warmth in my stomach, the comfort in illusory freedom.

I struggle to find normalcy in practicalities. In soap, in a sharpened pencil, in smiles over the computer keyboard. My fingers stranded in the air: Grammar Wanted.

The books in my head stack up higher and higher. Their pages already written, their sentences wrap around my throat. Nothing to speak about. Nothing else to write. Not even the raven cackles or cracks its voice in my ear. No stories here. Keep it moving.

The calm. The woman on her cell phone next to me. Texting. Connecting to a main frame. My bag on my lap. Staring into the phone screen. Head full. Full of words and phone calls and contracts and the mortgage.

These walls need painting. Or take down the walls. Nothing to worry about anymore.

## Failures

I'm not afraid of failure so much as I am failing myself: jobs left undone, books left unwritten, the dishwasher not emptied and the dog not walked.

Promises all made under the plastic mistletoe near the string of lights I've forgotten to put away. The small cheese plates I've meant to give away and the list of plants I've wanted to plant-thyme, cucumbers and radish. All these seeds without a dirt bed, without my hands to till the soil.

My heart breaks for the languages I've never learned. The Spanish and French books remain new and crisp, and the apple uneaten in the fridge. The Thai seasonings and the Udon I had to throw out.

Another day, I say. Another life. These tiny failures no one knows about, these are the ones I tuck under my pillow at night, even behind the loose tooth.

I left the stove on too long. Burnt the chicken.

I ate all the peppermint patties in my room, alone. Five pounds creeps up so close, and attaches itself against my breasts.

The card I bought for my nephew, but never sent out.

And the litter I've left for days—the cats took a shit in my rosemary plant after that. The dog rests beside me. He doesn't mind if I clean or not.

And my hidden text messages, the ones I sent to Dustin while Joe was sleeping. The messages full of poems and emoticons—hearts and kisses. None of it mattered the way Joe mattered. None of it felt good.

## Brutus

I clean the dishes, his small orange plate cracked at the rounded side. He watches me from the ground, sits at my heel—his tails spins like a pinwheel. Those brown eyes—how did I ever live without them?

The dishes are put away, sunk back in the dishwasher, next to the speckled soup bowl and coffee pot. Brutus follows me with his ears—one up, one down. He leans forward and sticks his backside up, nose to the ground. I think I hear him say, *Play now, I'll get the blue octopus.*

His head stays close to the ground, and I pat, scratch the top of his tan head. It's time to write, friend. Somehow, he knows. He stands tall and walks toward my laptop on the ottoman. He sniffs at it. *Thank you*, I say.

Brutus waits for me to sit down, to put the red pillow on my lap, prop the laptop on top, and kick back my feet. He jumps up and watches me get comfortable. Once I pause, I give him a look, acknowledging his presence. He looks back at me, acknowledging me back and spreads the length of my thigh.

I look down at him after I type a few words, after I write "Brutus" on the top of the white sheet. I wonder

how to start. It's a feeling, an emotion preserved in my fingertips along the width of my knuckle.

He doesn't mind when I move around, when I shift my bum in the cushions, slap my fingertips against the keys.

As long as it takes, he's there next to me, even when I'm writing far away from home, far away from the comfort of the couch, far away from the length of his warmth.



## PART VIII

Every morning I burn the toast. I kick the box of bills  
under the bed. I close my eyes.





## Sometimes a box isn't just a box

The box sits before the young women on the L train. The box moves and shakes. One of the women leans in to get a closer look. The box tears at the corner and a snake and a bear peek out.

The box rocks back and forth, shakes. The claws come out. The snake's tail rattles. The bear bites her hand in half and the snake punctures her throat. The girl with her birthday balloons screams and her mother covers her eyes with her palm. The young couple keeps kissing and the train dancers look on—no more dance moves.

The conductor runs out with his harpoon and strikes the bear at the side. An old man steps on the snake and crushes its rattle with his cane. The woman lies next to the doors, bleeding from the neck. The train screeches and howls down the track.

At Bedford Ave., the doors open. The little girl takes the young woman's sparkled headband, a swatch of hair from the dead bear for a dolly shawl.

The box opens its mouth and swallows the woman whole, then burps out her cell phone on the subway floor.

## Moon

Its white glow, like cigarette smoke curled at the ash. My wine in hand, the apartment slows, the incense in the air twirls around the dog. Legs propped, head tilted, thoughts of the moon. Thoughts of tomorrow and the next day. Failed novelist with 200 pages on her desk, nowhere to go but beneath the moon. Nowhere to stare, but at the moon.

## Maine

Katahdin Lake looks back at me. She's at the edge of my heart shooting sun between my fingers. I love the way she sits like she has nothing better to do.

The clouds: mouths open over the pines.

I wouldn't trade her shadow on the lake. Not even for one more cigarette, one more shot of Tequila, or Joe's kiss.

## Tequila

We had too much Tequila, and I smacked the shit out of you at the side of the bed. I hit you—across the cheek, palm open and chafed. I thought about Christiane and how you fucked her for days without calling me. I resented you that night, over the empty bottle of Tequila, the chewed up lime and the spilled salt.

I thought about her long blond hair and the freckles on her back. I thought about you kissing her shoulders and showing your erect cock, her hands all over the tip.

I hated you over the bottle on the floor. I hated the smile you gave me after I hit you—all my tears pooled under your chin, under your feet and the clipped toenail.

I wished you never hugged me. Never held me against your chest. Never, ever let me go.

## Avon by the Sea

Sand in my hair. Salt under my nose. I turn the beach into a small rubber ball I put in my pocket. A ball I throw to the floor: a portable beach, mobile serenity.

The pictures are not enough: too one-dimensional, too color corrected. I want it real, all natural, uninhabited by editors.

I keep writing, turn the water up a few degrees, make the waves gentle on my thighs. The sun softens my face with a light burn.

There are no chairs here. No blankets, or coolers. Not even umbrellas, or kids. There's no one here.

I roll it all up, into that ball. Hold it tight in my hand, push it deep into my pocket.

## Cancer Horoscope for September 5, 2015

Recently, you've wanted the things you can't have: home, car, job, and financial status. You might feel defeated, pulled apart, and ready to give up whenever you think about creating this idyllic home you've always wanted. Stop fantasizing. This will only get you into trouble, an emotional tailwind to the bottom of that bus you ride every day to Manhattan and back.

This weekend you'll want to spend time with friends and family, even yourself, long secluded hours locked away. Maybe in your room, or on a roof, or on top of a tree. This *home* you think about, day in and day out, doesn't exist. And I hate to tell you this, especially in your horoscope, the one thing you look forward to each week, those long weeks where you fantasize about drinking wine in that fantastical home in your head—it doesn't exist.

On the financial front, you'll have to stock away that cash. Hide it. You might want to bury it. You'll need it all when the time comes for you to bail on this stream of freelance writing jobs you've been taking, all thankless, but with decent pay. You'll have to take that money eventually and run off to some country, maybe the Philippines, and write that book you've been talking

about to the other person in your head. You know, the one where the self-help guru tries to commit suicide and her home-made noose falls from the ceiling? The one where she survives the most horrendous and ill-conceived suicide attempt and winds up in a Russian literature book club rather than a mental wellness group? That one. Stop acting like you don't know what I'm talking about. So save all that money. You need lots of paper and lots of drinks to get you through that first chapter and all the other ones you plan to live out.

It just might not be possible right now. Deep down, you wonder if it's foolish to dream. But it will be possible, and you have to believe that. In the meantime, start planning it in your mind.





## PART IX

I miss the garden and its tomatoes the most.



## 9/11 Remembrance Day

I miss the tall buildings, the crystal windows, and the people fluttering around the offices. I miss the elevators—up and down, and up again. And the phone calls, all the phones ringing and pinging in ears, voices signaling the next move.

The shuttle ride to the Hoboken PATH is full of loud talkers. Someone complains about his bad hip, another about how confusing the weather's been, and the woman behind me—eyes on her book, every sentence strings her along.

The sun starts to break up the clouds, and the grayness seems to disappear as I ride towards the Path. Someone texts me about editing her son's college essay; another one emails me about a new social media strategy—and I don't want to respond.

I ride through September, hope that all the trains run on time, hope the dog gets walked, and the coffee from Gregory's on 6<sup>th</sup> is fresh. Small thoughts, compared to the world falling apart, compared to the tall buildings, the rainbow overhead, and the plants glistening with rainwater.

So much depends on the conversations, the sky,  
the earthworm, the lives that haunt the debris cemented  
under the sidewalk.

I remember these small parts. And that's enough  
for today.

## I almost hit him

He stared at me through the windshield. His eyes not wide, but creased. Not with fear, just frustrated I almost ran him down. He might've missed the train if I got him. He wouldn't have gotten the peaches for his wife's pie, or eaten the powdered donut before work.

There's no way to tell if he had it coming. If my car almost hitting him would rule out his choking on the donut, or getting held up in the fruit store over some rotten peaches. There's no way to tell if this moment proves a small part in what comes next, an earlier version of what would reappear in new form farther up the road.

He looked at me, eyes creased. I couldn't talk, and I couldn't yell, or blame him for stepping out at the wrong time. I said "sorry" to myself and he stared me down as I drove away.

On the busy street, people were walking back and forth. A truck pulled up and delivered the breads to the deli.

## Spilled alcohol

I found my father on his bed, unshaven and not showered. His voice cracked and shrieked, moaned in anxiety, and seamless pain that lasted for days.

At 34, I'm traumatized by this vision. After 24 hours in the ER, I can't scrape his voice, his sunken face, his thin arms from my memory.

He looked at me, reached for my arm, for my hand. Cried, kept crying. So many times he asked for help, for me to help him. To call the ambulance, walk the officer up the stairs, ask him for his name, incapable of making small talk, like how's the weather when you're not helping alcoholic families to a stretcher, to the hospital.

Nothing came to me. Not even the smell of cleaning products needed to wash the drool from the table, or the washcloth for my father's chin.

## Brooklyn talk

They talk about grease and balls. The eggs spit across the griddle. Bacon ripples.

A conversation about liens and mortgages, and the painter keeps talking about butter and spoons. The restaurant owner tells the painter how nerve wracking the latest summons is and how *All of a sudden I can't do anything with this inspector riding my ass about changing the cooking oil, cleaning the linens.*

I hold Brutus' leash and point to the water bowl. Behind me, the cook shows the woman how she should split ribs.

*I wanna see your fucking house!* yells the restaurant owner. *I'll grab you by the neck next time you bother me about grease on the floor!*

I laugh and look down at my plate.

Brutus pisses on my backpack.

Fuck.

I loved Aleksy, once. Years ago, when I thought the world existed for just us.

We met at a party, warped and edged by summer. Beers in hands, dancing barefoot in the grass.

Sweat slid down the sides of our temples, and our hair soaked.

I didn't know I'd love him for seven years, or that we'd travel to Paris and Hamburg together, make love, totally unprotected, expecting that would bring us closer, tie us at the seams of our skin. I loved the way his lips tasted and how his face creased at the edges when he'd orgasm over me.

We smoked lots of weed that summer, and made love under the hammock in his dad's backyard, our backs on the pebbled ground. We looked at each other, our faces in each other's palms.

When he left for Poland after six weeks of love and whiskey, I cried for days. Even after we spoke on the phone for hours, sometimes into the next day, I still cried. I'd cry for seven years afterwards, waiting for him to love me back, commit to the hammock and the summer and the kisses, the thousands, millions of kisses, and my cheeks dimpled with grin.

\*



I watched Aleksy cry. The clamps, the bags, and the speculum glowed under the medical lights.

I knew nothing and everything would be OK. This child would find its way back to me in another life, another time, and with another person.

I took Aleksy's hand and cried with him. Our credit cards barely covered the expense of the grief. The room seemed smaller, no more than a burial box for a favored hamster. Not larger than a snail shell.

Aleksy covered his eyes, tears through his fingers. How did I miss his sadness through the weeks? His cruelty towards me for wanting to keep this tiny egg? He whispered, *I'm sorry, I'm sorry* over and over. I wanted say it's OK. It's OK, but I cried, too. Cried harder, replaying the moment and non-moment of pregnancy, the experience of being an empty mother.

I did no whispering. I let my tears stream down my red face, my blotched chest. I did not hold his hand. Instead, I screamed, *It's gone. It's gone!* The doctor moved the small red bag to the nurse's hands.

Later that night, Aleksy bought me fettuccine Alfredo and a Coke. I picked at the creamy strands, and sat back in the bed. He changed the channels, one after the next. *Nothing's on*, he said. And he kept clicking, kept

clicking—his other hand on my thigh, my hand wrapped around my fork.

## PART X

Under the light, I still love you. I can see you. I can see  
all of you—all the broken parts.



## Grad School British Dorm

I cried for hours that night. The bare mattress held me up above the cracked flooring. I curled up next to the white wall, its cool hand against my back. The paint chipped and peeled down to the floor.

My one bag lay at the center of the room. Inside it, one towel, a few toiletries, and college paperwork.

*What did I do? Why did I come here?* I spoke to myself. No answers. The tears streaked across my cheek, my eyes tender and puffy.

I stood up and dug the towel out from my bag, wrapped it around my shoulders. Outside the room, quiet. No sound.

I missed my mother and my father. The garden in the backyard. My sister's smile at the corner of my mind. My dogs and the cat. The fucking cat. How I missed his tail at the top of the bed.

Later that night, I left the building. Outside in Brighton, the sea air flew past my cheek. The seagulls cawed and squealed. I walked across North Road to the boardwalk and down the stairs. Under the walk, bars with men and women. Drinks and food. Lights and music.

I ordered a pint of beer and a cheddar and tomato sandwich and walked to the beach. The light from the bars faded as I got closer to the sea's lip. I sat down in a dash of light, enough light to make the water sparkle, to make the rest of the world light up right here, only here.

I lifted the pitcher of beer to my mouth, swallowed for a few seconds, and then gasped for air. I unwrapped the sandwich, ate with the sea, all those big and small fish in her belly.

I tilted my head back and hoped I made the right decision. I hoped my mom stared at the same sky tonight, or drank some beer, or sent out that package with extra blankets and pillows.

## In a field of yellow

I left the Port bottle under the bed and walked to the mirror. This body I didn't recognize. These arms, these hands, the face freckled and chubby looked foreign, but very much like my mother.

All the books on the dresser, scattered words like ants along the sidewalk. I want, I wanted. I always want something or someone to recognize the planets inside me. I'm always wanting.

The slow breaths I take over the stacks of books. The author names known and picked, hand-chosen out of the piles on top of the editor's desk. I get jealous and pouty. How could it never be me?

The Port tastes better in the morning. The silence tastes better with each gulp. Am I an alcoholic? Am I like my father or my mother? The long string of Sorrentinos and Kleinmans? All of them at the bottom of the bottle?

I can't make out my mother's face anymore. I can't even make out the bottle and the books, all of them bestsellers. I wish. I wish I were a flower in the ground, in a field of yellow. I file the wish away under *Never* and sip and sip.

Who would've known how beautiful the sun looks outside my window? How it mixes across the sky over Union City and fades quietly into another full day. I loved to watch the sky alone with Port. I love the taste of shadow and sounding like myself—the whole mix of self-awareness and blatant chaos.

At the edge of the chair, I flick the cigarette. Pushkin's *Demons* come to mind, but the words vanish like tracks in the mud. How many are there? What shall I do? There are devils everywhere, this and that way around the fields, feeding on a carcass.

Sip and sip.

How can I be saved? I'm an invisible woman.



## THE END

Never let me go, raincloud, never let me fall. Leave room  
for me, enough space to hide in the smallest storm.



## NOTES

"L train daydream": Ending lines adapted from *Further In* by Tomas Gösta Tranströmer.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Loren Kleinman's poetry has appeared in journals such as *ADANNA*, *Drunken Boat*, *The Moth*, *Domestic Cherry*, *Blue Lake Review*, *Columbia Journal*, *LEVURE LITTÉRAIRE*, *Stony Thursday* (Arts Council Ireland), *Nimrod*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, *Narrative Northeast*, *Writer's Bloc*, *Journal of New Jersey Poets*, *Paterson Literary Review* (PLR), *Resurgence* (UK), *HerCircleEzine* and *Aesthetica Annual*. Her interviews appeared in *IndieReader*, *USA Today*, and *The Huffington Post*. She's also published essays in *Cosmopolitan*, *Good Housekeeping* and *Seventeen Magazine*. She is the author of *Flamenco Sketches* and *Indie Authors Naked*, which was an Amazon Top 100 bestseller in Journalism in the UK and USA. Kleinman's *The Dark Cave Between My Ribs* was named one the best poetry books of 2014 by *Entropy Magazine*. Her other poetry collections include *Breakable Things* and the prose collection, *Stay With Me Awhile*. She is working on a novel, *This Way to Forever*. She is a faculty member at New York Writer's Workshop and a full-time freelance writer and social media strategist. *The Woman with a Million Hearts* is her first memoir. Loren's website is: [lorenkleinman.com](http://lorenkleinman.com) and [lorenwrites.com](http://lorenwrites.com).

## Praise for Loren Kleinman *The Woman with a Million Hearts*

Loren Kleinman brings a poet's sensibility to her captivating memoir that is at once serious and sly, self-deprecating and a powerful declaration of self. Her memoir is less about memory than it is a fine-tuned, near magical consideration of the small details that ultimately make manifest the large passions of her life. Her edgy meditations are a bit like a delicately rendered Lost and Found for the great grab bag of human experience--instantly relatable, brash, intimate and true.

Rita Gabis, author of *A Guest At The Shooters' Banquet*

Nothing is sexier than a woman who has learned to love and respect herself, and that's why *The Woman With a Million Hearts* is such a treasure. Kleinman's powerful journey, told in vignettes, is beautiful and vulnerable and bold and exciting. She's like the friend you haven't heard from in a while, and when she calls you immediately ditch your *I hate my body/boyfriend/husband/job/life* friends and meet her, because she's not just fun to be with, she's wise! She's been through a lot; she's endured a lot. So, you ask her, how does the self-love thing happen? And she answers. *No one matters as much as they think they do, not under the stars, under the heavy Milky Way...* and you know what, she's absolutely right! This book belongs on your night table, to be read and re-read.

Robin Stratton, *Boston Literary Magazine*

Loren Kleinman's *The Woman with a Million Hearts* is a lyrical masterpiece. In this beautiful memoir, Kleinman weaves stories of heartache, pain, healing, and hope into a breathtaking journey told with an honesty that will leave you gasping for air.

Amye Archer, *Fat Girl, Skinny*

Loren Kleinman's memoir, *The Woman with a Million Hearts*, blurs the line between memoir and poetry as she explores illness, loss, and love in a slim book that makes you understand how to love flawed humanity with tender compassion.

Karol Nielsen, author of the memoir, *Black Elephants*, and the poetry chapbook, *This Woman I Thought I'd Be*

Loren Kleinman is not just an organic expressionist-writer; she's also comparative to poetic musicians like Joni Mitchell and Bonnie Raitt. A unique and lively young voice filled with splendor!

**Kola Boof, *The Sexy Part of the Bible***

A daring act of memory in verse that dances in the space between poetry and prose, *The Woman with a Million Hearts* offers readers an equal number of delights.

**Lisa L. Kirchner, *Hello American Lady Creature: What I Learned as a Woman in Qatar***

Add one more heart to Loren Kleinman's *The Woman With A Million Hearts*. She grabbed mine from the first page and didn't release me until the last. Ms. Kleinman has written a luscious memoir—rich with expansive language; yet her words adhere to a rigorous economy which distills the essence of her experience to perfection. It is always a testament to a writer when the reader is inspired to go inward and think deeply. Loren Kleinman demands that of the reader, and we are better for it —more forgiving and more loving.

**Marcia Butler, author of the forthcoming memoir, *The Skin Above My Knee***

A generous and honest work of memoir that reads like poetry, Loren Kleinman's book will resonate with anyone who's ever wondered, 'How can I be saved?'

**Susan Breen, author of the *Maggie Dove* mystery series**

A new genre, perhaps more poetry than memoir, Loren Kleinman's *A WOMAN WITH A MILLION HEARTS* is a story of an inner life beautifully rendered. The life events that elicit these short pieces belong to the body rather than the mind, and fade in and out, sometimes hinting, sometimes revealing, as if they are happening inside out. Intimate, yet secretive. Compelling.

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